

National Statistics Developments – report to SAGE

Background

1. Following concerns about public trust in government statistics (see for example the controversy about changes to the unemployment count 10 or so years ago) the UK government has decided to put official statistics on a firm legislative footing.
2. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 established the Statistics Authority, which will formally assume its role on 1 April 2008. The Scottish Parliament agreed to accept the Act for Scotland through a legislative consent motion in February 2007.
3. The Statistics Authority will be the legal successor body to the Office for National Statistics and will subsume the role currently performed by the Statistics Commission. The Authority will have a statutory responsibility to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good, and the quality, good practice and comprehensiveness of official statistics. It will do this by developing a Code of Practice for Statistics. If official statistics comply with this Code, the Authority will designate them as “National Statistics”. The Authority’s responsibilities will cover the whole UK statistical system, including England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Sir Alan Langlands of Dundee University will be one of the non-executive directors of the Statistics Board.
4. The Authority therefore will verify that any statistics currently designated as National Statistics are of the required quality. The Authority intends to assess all current National Statistics (1,300 publications across the UK) over the next 5 years. The details on how it will carry out this task are still to be decided.
5. Statistics can also be designated as official statistics where the Authority will have an advisory function. The Scottish Parliament can designate bodies as providers of official statistics and so far the Information and Statistics Division (Health), HESA and the Student Loans Company have been designated. These bodies have been brought in first because they currently publish National Statistics.

Current situation and recent developments

6. Selected statistics from Colleges are currently published by the Scottish Government as National Statistics – higher education students, their attainment and destination, and EMA data are used in that way.
7. This means that the Statistics Authority will in due course check the quality of these statistics. As these statistics are based on data returned by colleges to the Funding Council, data over which the SFC has a quality control it seems logical to bring the SFC within the remit of the Statistics Authority – through designation as a producer of official statistics. This will have benefits for the quality and status of statistics, and should also give enhanced status to staff working on these statistics, in the SFC and in colleges.
8. In England the Learning and Skills Council is already being designated as such. One problem is that we do not yet know how the Statistics Authority is going to work or what will be in the revised Code , so it is not a disadvantage to do this slightly later.
9. The Scottish government will in due course develop a framework for statistics that will include all official statistics relevant for Scotland.

Guidance Letter

10. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has similar aims in mind when she stressed the importance of statistics in her Guidance Letter to the Funding Council:

You will, of course, be aware that we recently signed a concordat with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which sets twelve specified commitments. We expect all public sector bodies, including the Funding Council, to contribute, where appropriate, to the delivery of these objectives. In addition, our National Performance Framework sets out fifteen national outcomes and I wish to see further progress on a single, jointly owned performance framework for the Council which draws on both the Concordat and the Framework. A key factor in all of this, of course, is ensuring that the Council's statistics and evaluation evidence are both relevant and accurate. I expect the Council's statistics to be subject to the same quality control and publication protocols that guide the production of Scottish Government statistics. We are expected to demonstrate progress.

Way forward

11. The Scottish Government and the SFC will work on a new joint memorandum of understanding covering statistics. This will make clear the roles of each organisation, quality control and handling issues and the aim of designating SFC as a producer of official statistics.
12. It is anticipated that the Scottish Government will elaborate on the Guidance Letter and state which statistics are most relevant in the context of the letter.
13. SAGE will continue to have the important role of commenting critically both as a data supplier and data user, on the statistics required from colleges and on statistical publications. We will keep SAGE fully informed of progress.

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